

Claims

What is claimed is:

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1. A method for reducing excess capacity for restaurants during a predetermined period of time through a web-site comprising the steps of:

5 enabling one or more restaurants to post one or more items for auction wherein the item is valid for a predetermined period of time;

enabling one or more users to place a bid on the item for auction;

processing bids to determine a winner; and

10 awarding the winner the item wherein the item is redeemable at the restaurant during the predetermined period of time.

2. The method of claim 1 wherein the restaurant sets a minimum bid for the item for auction.

3. The method of claim 1 wherein the item for auction is a dining certificate for use at the restaurant.

15 4. The method of claim 1 wherein the step of enabling one or more users to bid on the item for auction includes a registration process where the user provides at least one or more of identification, demographic and restaurant preference information.

20 5. The method of claim 1 wherein the step of enabling one or more restaurants to post one or more items for auction includes a registration process where the restaurant provides at least one or more of restaurant description, meal description and facilities description.

6. The method of claim 1 wherein a user can search for one or more auctions of interest by one or more of restaurant name, cuisine type, location, specified time, and meal.

7. The method of claim 1 wherein the step of enabling one or more users to place a bid on the item for auction includes placing a quantity of item amount and a bid amount.

8. The method of claim 1 wherein the step of enabling one or more users to place a bid on the item for auction includes an auto-bid feature where the user submits a maximum bid amount and a bid increment amount where the bids are automatically incremented to the maximum amount.

9. The method of claim 1 wherein the step of enabling one or more users to place a bid on the item for auction includes an instant purchase feature that enables the restaurant to specify a fixed dollar amount for which the user can buy the item without participating in the auction.

10. The method of claim 1 wherein a user can create a personalized auction page where the user creates an auction list comprising a list of one or more auctions of interest and monitors the one or more auctions of interest on the auction list.

11. The method of claim 1 comprising the step of rewarding the user for referring one or more new users to the web-site.

12. The method of claim 1 comprising the step of rewarding the user for referring one or more new restaurants to the web-site.

13. The method of claim 1 comprising the step of enabling the user to monitor rewards awarded to the user and redeem the rewards.

14. The method of claim 1 comprising the step of enabling the restaurant to display an advertisement for an auction at a premium space.

5 15. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of displaying a list of current auctions and enabling the user to participate in a current auction.

16. The method of claim 1 wherein a restaurant guide enables the user to search for one or more restaurants of interest by one or more of cuisine type, location, and price range.

10 17. The method of claim 15 further comprising the step of enabling users to post ratings and reviews of dining experiences at one or more restaurants of interest.

18. The method of claim 15 further comprising the step of enabling users to view ratings of one or more restaurants of interest posted by other users.

15 19. The method of claim 15 further providing a hyper-link to a separate restaurant page containing information regarding the restaurant of interest including one or more of description of the restaurant, type of food, services, and facilities.

20 20. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of providing a recipe center where users may view recipe and cooking information.

21. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of providing a gifts center where users may purchase merchandise.

22. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of enabling users to participate in a chat/message board.

23. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of enabling the restaurant to track and monitor current bids on items posted by the restaurant.

5 24. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of enabling the restaurant to set an auction schedule where the restaurant designates a specified number of items to be auctioned at a specified time period.

25. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of enabling the restaurant to create a survey for users to complete where users provide one or
10 more of demographic, identification, and dining information where the information is used for targeted marketing and promotions.

26. The method of claim 1 wherein bidding data and user information are aggregated and provided to restaurants and wherein the restaurants can use the information collected for targeted marketing and promotions.

15 27. The method of claim 26 wherein user information includes sales history data.

28. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of enabling users to specify a preferred mode of advertisement delivery including one or more of email, a display at a personalized page on the web-site, and regular mail.

20 29. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of providing an account module where the restaurant can monitor the number and type of items sold along with its account status with the web-site.

30. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of providing the restaurant with a summary page outlining results of an auction for one or more items posted by the restaurant.

31. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of receiving from the restaurant a report of attendance indicating which winners redeemed the items.

32. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of enabling the winner to download the item for redemption from the web-site or electronic mail.

33. The method of claim 1 wherein the winner pays for the item at the time of redemption and any amount over the value of the item.

34. The method of claim 1 wherein the winner pays for the item at the time the winner is declared the winner.

35. The method of claim 1 wherein an electronic certificate is sent to the restaurant and the winner informs the restaurant of the certificate at time of redemption.

36. A system for reducing excess capacity for restaurants during a predetermined period of time through a web-site comprising:

a restaurant module enabling one or more restaurants to post one or more items for auction wherein the item is valid for a predetermined period of time;

a user module enabling one or more users to place a bid on the item for auction; and

a system processor for processing bids to determine a winner; and

an award module for awarding the winner the item wherein the item is redeemable at the restaurant during the predetermined period of time.

37. The system of claim 36 wherein the restaurant sets a minimum bid for the item for auction.

5 38. The system of claim 36 wherein the item for auction is a dining certificate for use at the restaurant.

39. The system of claim 36 wherein the user module includes a registration module where the user provides at least one or more of identification, demographic and restaurant preference information.

10 40. The system of claim 36 wherein the restaurant module includes a registration module where the restaurant provides at least one or more of restaurant description, meal description and facilities description.

15 41. The system of claim 36 wherein a user can search for one or more auctions of interest by one or more of restaurant name, cuisine type, location, specified time, and meal.

42. The system of claim 36 wherein the user module includes placing a quantity of item amount and a bid amount.

20 43. The system of claim 36 wherein the user module includes an auto-bid feature where the user submits a maximum bid amount and a bid increment amount where the bids are automatically incremented to the maximum amount.

44. The system of claim 36 wherein the user module includes an instant purchase feature that enables the restaurant to specify a fixed dollar amount for which the user can buy the item without participating in the auction.

45. The system of claim 36 wherein a user can create a personalized auction page where the user creates an auction list comprising a list of one or more auctions of interest and monitors the one or more auctions of interest on the auction list.

5 46. The system of claim 36 further comprising a reward module where the user is rewarded for referring one or more new users to the web-site.

47. The system of claim 36 further comprising a reward module where the user is rewarded for referring one or more new restaurants to the web-site.

10 48. The system of claim 36 further comprising a reward monitor module where the user can monitor rewards awarded to the user and redeem the rewards.

49. The system of claim 36 further comprising an advertisement module where the restaurant can display an advertisement for an auction at a premium space.

15 50. The system of claim 36 further comprising a current auction module where a list of current auctions is displayed to the user where the user can participate in a current auction.

20 51. The system of claim 36 wherein a restaurant guide enables the user to search for one or more restaurants of interest by one or more of cuisine type, location, and price range.

52. The system of claim 51 further comprising a ratings module where users can post ratings and reviews of dining experiences at one or more restaurants of interest.

53. The system of claim 51 further comprising a view ratings module where users can view ratings of one or more restaurants of interest posted by other users.

54. The system of claim 51 further providing a hyper-link to a separate restaurant page containing information regarding the restaurant of interest including one or more of description of the restaurant, type of food, services, and facilities.

55. The system of claim 36 further comprising a recipe center where users can view recipe and cooking information.

56. The system of claim 36 further comprising a gifts center where users can purchase merchandise.

57. The system of claim 36 further comprising a chat/message board for users to converse with other users and restaurant representatives.

58. The system of claim 36 further comprising a monitor current bids module where the restaurant can track and monitor current bids on items posted by the restaurant.

59. The system of claim 36 further comprising an auction schedule module where the restaurant can set an auction schedule where the restaurant designates a specified number of items to be auctioned at a specified time period.

60. The system of claim 36 wherein the restaurant can create a survey for users to complete where users provide one or more of demographic, identification, and dining information where the information is used for targeted marketing and promotions.

61. The system of claim 36 wherein bidding data and user information are aggregated and provided to restaurants and wherein the restaurants can use the information collected for targeted marketing and promotions.

62. The system of claim 61 wherein user information includes sales history data.

63. The system of claim 36 wherein users can specify a preferred mode of advertisement delivery including one or more of email, a display at a personalized page on the web-site, and regular mail.

64. The system of claim 36 further comprising an account module where the restaurant can monitor the number and type of items sold along with its account status with the web-site.

65. The system of claim 36 wherein a summary page is provided to the restaurant outlining results of an auction for one or more items posted by the restaurant.

66. The system of claim 36 wherein a report of attendance indicating which winners redeemed the items is received from the restaurant.

67. The system of claim 36 wherein the winner can download the item for redemption from the web-site or electronic mail.

68. The system of claim 36 wherein the winner pays for the item at the time of redemption and any amount over the value of the item.

69. The system of claim 36 wherein the winner pays for the item at the time the winner is declared the winner.

70. The system of claim 36 wherein an electronic certificate is sent to the restaurant and the winner informs the restaurant of the certificate at time of redemption.

71. An on-line method for reducing unused capacity for restaurants, the method comprising the steps of:

- a. providing a web site to which a restaurant can post an offer to auction one or more certificates for use at specified times, the one or more certificates having a predetermined value and being redeemable at the restaurant;
- b. receiving at the web site a bid from one or more bidders, specifying an amount the bidder is willing to pay for a certificate;
- c. determining a winning bidder for at least one certificate;
- d. issuing to the winning bidder a certificate, the certificate comprising identification of the restaurant, the value of the certificate, specified times for use of the certificate, a unique certificate identifier and user identification information;
- e. providing to the restaurant a list of winning bidders;
- f. receiving from the restaurant an attendance report indicating which bidders have redeemed certificates; and
- g. collecting from the restaurant a fee for certificates redeemed.

72. The method of claim 71 wherein the web site enables potential bidders to search for auctions of interest by one or more of restaurant name, cuisine type, location, specified time, and meal.

73. The method of claim 71 wherein the web site comprises one or more featured auctions sections that prominently display certain auctions.

74. The method of claim 73 wherein the step of collecting a fee from a restaurant comprises collecting a premium fee for featured auctions.

5 75. The method of claim 74 wherein the results of a search retains a list of auctions meeting user specified search criteria and summary information about the auction, where each auction in the list comprises a hyper-link to a separate web page for that auction, the web page comprising more detailed information about the auction.

10 76. The method of claim 75 wherein the web site further comprises a bid page from which a user can enter a bid, the bid page comprising a hyper-link to the separate web page for a particular auction.

15 77. The method of claim 71 wherein a winning bidder pays for the certificate at the time the certificate is redeemed along with a payment for any amount over the value of the certificate.

78. The method of claim 71 wherein a winning bidder pays for the certificate at the time the bidder is declared a winning bidder.

20 79. The method of claim 71 further comprising the step of receiving at the web site and storing profile information from a bidder prior to enabling the bidder to bid on an auction.

80. The method of claim 79 wherein the profile information comprises at least user identification, user contact information and user preference

information, further comprising the step of contacting the user when auctions corresponding to the user preference information are posted.

81. The method of claim 79 further comprising the step of making available to each user for whom profile information is stored a personalized auction information page, the personalized auction page comprising personalized auction lists, auction reward information and current profile information.

82. The method of claim 71 wherein the web site further comprises a restaurant guide, the method further comprising the step of receiving at the web site restaurant reviews by users.

83. The method of claim 82 wherein the restaurant guide is searchable and comprises a hyper-link from a search result page to auctions for restaurants listed on the search result page.

84. The method of claim 71, the web site further comprising an auction status listing, the method further comprising the step of displaying current auction status information comprising an auction closing time and bid information including the current bid, bid increment and minimum bid.

85. The method of claim 71 wherein a restaurant may permit one or more certificates to be subject to an instant award at a fixed amount whereby a user can ensure entitlement to a certificate by offering the fixed amount rather than participating in an auction.

86. The method of claim 71 wherein the web site comprises a proxy bidding system where a bidder can specify a maximum amount the bidder is willing to

bid for a certificate and the proxy bidding system will enter bids automatically for the bidder up to the specified maximum.

87. The method of claim 71 further comprising an auction management module for registered restaurants, the auction management module comprising a listing of the restaurants current auction postings, customer information, and certificate sales history.

88. The method of claim 71 comprising an auction management module, the auction management module enabling registered restaurants to create, delete and modify auctions and track current bid information.

89. The method of claim 71 further comprising the step of collecting at the web site information about each bidder that bids on one or more certificates for a particular restaurant, and providing to that restaurant aggregate data on those bidders that bid on one or more certificates for that restaurant, including demographic information, bid frequency and number of redemptions.

90. The method of claim 89 further comprising the step of generating a targeted promotion directed at customers of a particular restaurant based on the aggregate data.

91. The method of claim 87 further comprising the step of analyzing historical sales data to determine average winning bid amounts for certificates having a predetermined value, by a specified time period.

92. The method of claim 91 further comprising the step of using the average winning bid amount and adding a premium to it to determine an instant award amount.

93. The method of claim 71 further comprising an account page for each restaurant to enable a restaurant to view the number and type of certificates it has sold, its account status with the web site and restaurant profile information.

94. The method of claim 71 wherein the step of posting an offer further comprises enabling a restaurant to enter one or more of an item description, time restriction information, a value, a minimum bid amount, the quantity of certificates, the duration of the auction and the recurrence of the auction.

95. The method of claim 94 further comprising the step of offering to the restaurant one or more options to increase the likelihood that consumers will focus on that restaurant's auction, the options including a boldface title for the auction, a category feature auction and an auction home page feature, and further comprising the step of collecting a premium from the restaurant for using one or more of such options for a given auction.

96. The method of claim 71 further comprising the step of maintaining an auction attendance list, the list comprising, for each auction on the list, an auction identification number, a close date, a retail amount value, time restrictions information, winning bidder information and redemption status information.

97. The method of claim 71 further comprising the step of e-mailing customers notification that an auction has been posted.

98. The method of claim 71 further comprising the step of collecting user profiles at the web site, determining auctions of interest to specified users based

on preference information in the users profile and contacting the user about auctions corresponding to the users preference information.

99. The method of claim 71 comprising the step of providing an award credit to users that refer restaurants to the web site.

5 100. The method of claim 71 further comprising the step of notifying a losing bidder that an auction that the bidder bid on closed without that bidder being a winning bidder and notifying that bidder of other auctions that correspond to one or more parameters of the auction on which the bidder unsuccessfully bid.

101. The method of claim 71, the web site further comprising a recipe page to enable users to share recipes.

102. An on-line system for reducing unused capacity for restaurants, the method comprising:

a. a web site to which a restaurant can post an offer to auction one or more certificates for use at specified times, the one or more certificates having a predetermined value and being redeemable at the restaurant;

b. a bidding module for receiving at the web site a bid from one or more bidders, specifying an amount the bidder is willing to pay for a certificate;

c. a processor for determining a winning bidder for at least one certificate;

d. a certificate issuing module for issuing to the winning bidder a certificate, the certificate comprising identification of the restaurant, the value of the certificate, specified times for use of the certificate, a unique certificate identifier and user identification information;

e. a listing module for providing to the restaurant a list of winning bidders;

f. a report module for receiving from the restaurant an attendance report indicating which bidders have redeemed certificates; and

5 g. a fee module for collecting from the restaurant a fee for certificates redeemed.

103. The system of claim 102 wherein the web site enables potential bidders to search for auctions of interest by one or more of restaurant name, cuisine type, location, specified time, and meal.

104. The system of claim 102 wherein the web site comprises one or more featured auctions sections that prominently display certain auctions.

105. The system of claim 104 wherein the fee module comprises collecting a premium fee for featured auctions.

15 106. The system of claim 105 wherein the results of a search retains a list of auctions meeting user specified search criteria and summary information about the auction, where each auction in the list comprises a hyper-link to a separate web page for that auction, the web page comprising more detailed information about the auction.

20 107. The system of claim 106 wherein the web site further comprises a bid page from which a user can enter a bid, the bid page comprising a hyper-link to the separate web page for a particular auction.

108. The system of claim 102 wherein a winning bidder pays for the certificate at the time the certificate is redeemed along with a payment for any amount over the value of the certificate.

109. The system of claim 102 wherein a winning bidder pays for the certificate at the time the bidder is declared a winning bidder.

110. The system of claim 102 further comprising a profile module for receiving at the web site and storing profile information from a bidder prior to enabling the bidder to bid on an auction.

111. The system of claim 110 wherein the profile information comprises at least user identification, user contact information and user preference information, further comprising the step of contacting the user when auctions corresponding to the user preference information are posted.

112. The system of claim 110 further comprising a personalized auction page for each user for whom profile information is stored, the personalized auction page comprising personalized auction lists, auction reward information and current profile information.

113. The system of claim 102 wherein the web site further comprises a restaurant guide, the system further comprising restaurant reviews by users at the web site.

114. The system of claim 113 wherein the restaurant guide is searchable and comprises a hyper-link from a search result page to auctions for restaurants listed on the search result page.

115. The system of claim 102, the web site further comprising an auction status listing, the system further comprising a display module for displaying current auction status information comprising an auction closing time and bid information including the current bid, bid increment and minimum bid.

116. The system of claim 102 wherein a restaurant may permit one or more certificates to be subject to an instant award at a fixed amount wherein a user can ensure entitlement to a certificate by offering the fixed amount rather than participating in an auction.

117. The system of claim 102 wherein the web site comprises a proxy bidding system where a bidder can specify a maximum amount the bidder is willing to bid for a certificate and the proxy bidding system will enter bids automatically for the bidder up to the specified maximum.

118. The system of claim 102 further comprising an auction management module for registered restaurants, the auction management module comprising a listing of the restaurants current auction postings, customer information, and certificate sales history.

119. The system of claim 102 comprising an auction management module, the auction management module enabling registered restaurants to create, delete and modify auctions and track current bid information.

120. The system of claim 102 wherein information about each bidder that bids on one or more certificates for a particular restaurant is collected at the web site, and providing to that restaurant aggregate data on those bidders that bid on

one or more certificates for that restaurant, including demographic information, bid frequency and number of redemptions.

121. The system of claim 120 wherein a targeted promotion directed at customers of a particular restaurant based on the aggregate data is generated.

5 122. The system of claim 118 wherein historical sales data is analyzed to determine average winning bid amounts for certificates having a predetermined value, by a specified time period.

123. The system of claim 122 wherein a premium is added to the average winning bid amount to determine an instant award amount.

10 124. The system of claim 102 further comprising an account page for each restaurant to enable a restaurant to view the number and type of certificates it has sold, its account status with the web site and restaurant profile information.

15 125. The system of claim 102 wherein posting an offer further comprises enabling a restaurant to enter one or more of an item description, time restriction information, a value, a minimum bid amount, the quantity of certificates, the duration of the auction and the recurrence of the auction.

20 126. The system of claim 125 wherein the restaurant is offered one or more options to increase the likelihood that consumers will focus on that restaurant's auction, the options including a boldface title for the auction, a category feature auction and an auction home page feature, and further comprising the step of collecting a premium from the restaurant for using one or more of such options for a given auction.

127. The system of claim 102 further comprising an auction attendance list comprising, for each auction on the list, an auction identification number, a close date, a retail amount value, time restrictions information, winning bidder information and redemption status information.

128. The system of claim 102 wherein customers are notified that an auction has been posted by email .

129. The system of claim 102 wherein user profiles are collected at the web site, auctions of interest to specified users based on preference information in the users profile are determined and the user is informed of auctions corresponding to the users preference information.

130. The system of claim 102 wherein an award credit is provided to users that refer restaurants to the web site.

131. The system of claim 102 further comprising a notification module for notifying a losing bidder that an auction that the bidder bid on closed without that bidder being a winning bidder and notifying that bidder of other auctions that correspond to one or more parameters of the auction on which the bidder unsuccessfully bid.

132. The system of claim 102, the web site further comprising a recipe page to enable users to share recipes.